

Mage and Paladin by Kamije Celeek

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Summary: The Party is a group of thieves set on taking down the 'Department of Energy'-a crime syndicate that raised Mage as one of their own members. She turned on them and now she's going to stop them. That's the easy part. The hard part is doing it while also keeping her boyfriend from getting himself killed trying to protect her in the field.

1. The Party

So on a whim, I started watching the Carmen Sandiego series on Netflix. As of writing this, it's a pretty good new series. And it doesn't hurt that our boy Finn is in it basically playing Mike Wheeler in the 21st century while helping a master thief do her thing. I know you guys didn't click on this to hear my review of some new series, though, so here goes my story.

Siberia, Russia. November 7, 20XX. 0216 Hours.

Security cameras scanned back and forth outside the secure base. Inside, a man known only as Nine was admiring his latest score from a robbery. A valuable item known as the Grail of Dionysus. Supposedly it had been used by the god himself, and it was made entirely out of amethyst and gold. He was prepared to offer it to his bosses back at the 'Department of Energy'.

Then the lights flickered and there was a moving shape on the cameras.

"Nobody could've gotten through the security system..." he growled. He'd installed it himself—a top-of-the-line system that was used by museums all over the world. Nine got up and began to draw his weapon of choice.

I stole this. It's mine!

"Come out and fight, you coward!" he called.

"I wouldn't call myself a 'coward,'" a female voice said behind him. He whirled around to see a woman with curly brown hair (topped with a pink fedora) wearing a pink overcoat and black pants. She had the Grail in her hand.

"Eleven..."

"It's Mage now. And you can remember it."

The lights flickered again and she was gone.

And so was the Grail.

"FUCK!"

"Great job with the security system, Bard. Never would've made it in by myself."

"Of course you wouldn't have. Paladin says you're beautiful and smart but hopeless with technology."

"Tell him to save it for when I bring the Grail back."

She slid out into the snow and a motorcycle roared up. The rider gave her a look through the visor on their helmet and tossed a second to her. Once she was on, they sped off into the night. Nine came out of his base screaming... only to find himself surrounded by law enforcement aiming guns at him. He got down on his knees and muttered about traitorous bitches.

Mage had gotten away.

My name is Mage, formerly known as Eleven, AKA Jane Hopper, and I'm a professional thief. I don't steal from dig sites or from museums, though; I steal from other thieves. Taking back priceless artifacts or pieces of history is what I do, returning them to where they belong so that others can take in their meaning and significance for themselves. It's not an easy path, but it's fun. Not to mention I get to stick it to the 'Department of Energy'—AKA the biggest crime syndicate in the world.

Now, of course, I can't do this on my own. I have a crew who backs me up through thick and thin.

First, there's Cleric, AKA Will Byers. He's our forgery expert who also happens to be my stepbrother. A sweet guy who doesn't have the mental fortitude for being in the field like I do. But he hates the 'Department of Energy' just as much as the rest of us. They kidnapped him when he was twelve, which was actually how he and I met, shortly before I met my birth father for the first time and was given a

way out.

Then there's Ranger, alias Lucas Sinclair. He's in the field as much as I am, except he's not actually stealing anything. Usually, he's covering my ass by being the lookout/sharpshooter. If something's up, he'll call me and tell me to get out of there. He was the one who trusted me the least initially, but now we're really good friends. Any negativity between us is long dead and buried in the ground.

Next up is Zoomer—better known as Max Mayfield. Like me and Lucas, she's usually in the field. But she's basically our getaway driver and an expert in shaking off anybody who might be tailing us. In any given heist, she'll be waiting around the corner for the second I drop out of the building. And to think, when we met, we hated each other for no other reason than the facts that she thought I was a pretty popular girl and I thought she was trying to replace me.

Fourth up is Bard, or Dustin Henderson. For lack of a better term, he's our hacker and technological expert who can get into almost any system in the world. It's kind of weird to watch, but it's probably the thing that's saved me more times than anything else. If it weren't for him, I probably would have tripped more alarms and been arrested dozens of times over. Not to mention he thinks my skills are nothing short of awesome superpowers that I use for good instead of evil.

Finally, there's Paladin, known to others as Mike Wheeler. He's our leader and the one who's usually making the plans for our heists once he gets the necessary information. Like Will and Dustin, he's not really much of a field guy, but that doesn't stop him from trying to get out there. Usually, it's in an effort to protect me from whatever cops or agents are on my tail. No matter how many times I tell him I can protect myself. But I can't bring myself to be mad at him; after all, he's a thief who stole my heart and he calls me the thief who stole his.

Together, we're the Party—the most sophisticated group of thieves in the world. To everyone, we seem unstoppable, but my pink coat is the thing that kind of defines us. Mage is the name the world knows as the thief and Jane is the name they know as me.

"You got it?"

Mike opened the cargo hold of the plane to let Max drive the motorcycle up and park it. The redhead took off her helmet and El did the same, shaking out her curly brown hair. Of course, as soon as that was done, she pulled the Grail of Dionysus out of her bag and showed it off to her boyfriend.

"Got it."

"And Nine?"

"In the hands of Russian MPs." He swept her into a hug and they kissed briefly before Max gagged.

"Okay, lovebirds. Let's get moving before they come after us." She headed towards the cockpit. "LUCAS! GET YOUR ASS IN GEAR AND GET US THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!"

El and Mike strapped into their seats next to each other, the Grail secured elsewhere. With everyone onboard, they took off into the night. Mike smiled at his girlfriend and squeezed her hand gently.

A few hours later, they were still in the air, but El had gotten in a power nap and was now walking around the plane. She looked out the window at the ocean below and sighed.

"What's wrong?" Mike asked.

"Have you ever wondered what will happen once this is all over? Once the 'Department of Energy' is taken down for good and we don't have to do this anymore?"

"Of course I have." He leaned on the wall, supporting his lanky frame with his hand. "The only thing that will change is that we won't be off on globe-trotting heists. We'll still be together, and maybe we can take the next step we discussed."

She knew what he was talking about and her mind flashed back to that night—where, in the heat of dodging Interpol while they were in Paris, he'd asked her to marry him. Her initial reaction had been shock, but they hadn't been able to discuss it until they'd gotten back

on the plane. Besides the overall cheese factor of him popping the question *in Paris*, she'd turned it down because it wasn't safe for them to advance to that stage yet.

He'd understood and agreed to shelve it for another time.

"I'd like that. And a *proper* proposal not made while running from what's essentially the European FBI."

"You'll get it, I promise."

They kissed and Mike pinned her to the wall of the plane before heating things up. El wrapped a leg around his waist and buried a hand in his messy hair. Then the intercom crackled.

"Attention, lovebirds, this is your co-captain speaking." Max said over the intercom. *"If you two are going to suck face and renew your memberships to the Mile-High Club, please move to a storage unit. We all use that area and I would prefer not to think of you screwing near my baby."*

Mike and El both turned pink before Mike pulled away. Then El grabbed the front of his jacket and yanked him towards one of the small storage units that was located in the hold.

In the cockpit, Max rolled her eyes.

"Jesus Christ. Can they keep their hands off each other for ten goddamn minutes?"

"They've been in love with each other since we were twelve," Lucas reminded her. "I don't blame them for being touchy."

"But do they *have* to do it ten feet from Carmen?"

"I still can't believe you named your motorcycle."

"I still can't believe you're a sharpshooter."

The plane continued on its way back Hawkins, Indiana.

2. After the Heist

The Cabin. Hawkins, Indiana. November 7, 20XX. 1114 Hours.

El sighed and stretched as she walked through the door of the cabin. It had been her first real home outside of the 'Department of Energy' and the first place she'd ever lived with her father. After he'd married Joyce, they'd moved into town, just a few streets away from Mike. Now it was her home and the official base of operations for the Party. A few additions to the place had insured its security and their safety when they came home to Hawkins. Some of those changes included a few extra rooms added to the back of the place and an underground 'control center' for Dustin.

And it was where she lived with all her friends, so there's that.

"I want to sleep for a decade," Mike groaned, entering the cabin and promptly flopping onto the couch. Will looked at him with a smile from where he was working on a piece for one of his *legal* clients.

"Well, *maybe* if you didn't spend so much time making out with El on the plane..." Max snickered, coming inside. "I parked Carmen in the shed. Hope you don't mind."

"Of course not," El replied, tugging at Mike's arm. "Mike, c'mon. Sleep in our bed."

"Let me sleep here."

"Fine. Then I'll sleep there. All alone..." His dark brown eyes fluttered open to see her pouting and he had no choice but to relent.

"I'm coming..." He got up and they headed to their bedroom. A few minutes later, Max and Lucas could hear him snoring away. Max peeked her head in to see El asleep next to him, curled up and breathing lightly.

"Well, the lovebirds were exhausted if they went to sleep without cuddling first," she deadpanned.

"It was a long flight," Lucas reminded her. "You and I got to sleep for

a few hours while El and Dustin were dealing with security. Mike was too worried."

"Any hope of breakfast?" Dustin asked, coming out of the hidden door in the floor.

"Not unless you can speed up El's sleep cycle. She and Mike just passed out."

"What, they spend four hours screwing in the storage again?"

"Two. And they spent the rest of the flight talking," Max reported.

"About what?"

"What do you *think*?" Max rolled her eyes. "How about the fact that Wheeler popped the question in Paris?"

"*What?!*" Will yelped, turning to face them.

"Yeah, I second that—*what?!*" Dustin added. "I did *not* hear that in the communications!"

"Yeah, it was while El had it turned off to try and avoid having the signal tracked. They were running from Interpol and he just asked her out of nowhere."

"Did she say yes? Are Mike and I actually going to be brothers?" Will asked.

"She said no because it's 'not the right time' and 'not safe'."

"And they're *still* together?!"

"They've been together since we were fucking *twelve*. That's eight goddamn years. They both know it'll end in marriage eventually, but El's right. Now is not the time for *any of us* to be taking that step in any of our relationships."

"What relationship?" Dustin grumbled.

"Bitch, you know what I mean."

"Still... I'm surprised she didn't give him a tentative yes."

"I wish those stupid security cams on the plane had audio so I could've heard what they were talking about."

"But then you would've heard them going at it," Lucas reminded her.

"Okay, never mind."

"I vote we make them live on the plane," stated Will. "Then Dustin doesn't have to sleep in his bunker."

"I *like* my bunker, thank you very much. It's private. And soundproof."

"Okay, then I'm moving down there with you."

"Negative. You're up here because of the light. I don't need light down there. Plus, you're the only one of us with a legitimate job."

Will relented and went back to work. Lucas and Max went to go take a quick nap. Dustin retreated to his bunker and started monitoring the 'Department of Energy' lines to try and find their next target.

Unknown location. November 7, 20XX. 1200 Hours.

Steve yelped as he was jolted awake by a slight shock to the cheek.

"Who are you?!" he asked, frantic. "I'm warning you—I know how to fight!"

"Relax, Mr. Harrington," a girl's voice sighed. His eyes adjusted to the dim light and he could see the girl in front of him.

"Who are you?"

"Not important." Her arms were crossed.

"Okay, so what *is* important?"

"Steven James Harrington." She started to walk around and he noticed the file in her hands. "Deputy to Chief James 'Jim' Hopper. Worked there for six years and have more arrests than anybody else

on the force—and more importantly... you get the right person every time."

"So what?"

"So... you have a gun, a badge, and small-town respect. But you *also* have *skill*. Like you said yourself, you know how to fight. The truth is, Mr. Harrington, is that my organization needs you."

"Your... organization?"

"Yes. We are simply called the Organization, but that helps us stay concealed. We want you to join."

"Okay, this seems like a *cult*. What do you even do?"

"There's another organization called the 'Department of Energy'. It's a crime syndicate that steals valuable artifacts from around the world. But more recently, we've discovered a group that goes by the name of the Party."

"I've heard of them! Aren't they, like, the *best* thieves in the world?"

"And from what little information we have, one of their members was once part of the 'Department of Energy'. If you choose to join us, you'll be helping to track down criminals on a global scale and bringing down the most dangerous people in the world."

Steve could feel his mouth drying. He was basically being offered a position in the FBI without working for the government. This girl wanted him to work for her because she thought he was talented.

"Okay, say I agree to join the Organization. How do I know you're legit?"

"Trust me, we are. And you wouldn't be going into the field alone. We already selected a team for you. But all we need is for you to say yes."

Stiffly, Steve nodded. She dug into the file and handed him an ID card.

Steven Harrington. The Organization.

"This will give you access to our bases if you can track them down. A pleasure doing business with you."

He really hoped he wasn't making a mistake.

The Cabin. Hawkins, Indiana. November 7, 20XX. 1612 Hours.

Mike groaned as he felt himself waking up. He wasn't on the plane for once; he was in his own damn bed. That feeling alone made him a little lighter, but then he looked beside him to see El—his girlfriend, the love of his life. She was curled up and asleep, her breathing soft and even. Looking at her, you never would've guessed she'd robbed a compound in Siberia a little more than twelve hours before.

"Hey," he whispered, touching her wrist. Her honey-brown eyes fluttered open and she smiled.

"Hey."

"You ready to face the world?"

"Mm... nope."

"Me either." He wrapped his lanky arms around her and pulled her close, the two of them feeling warm and safe in each other's arms; a small comfort in their world of jet-setting and foreign artifacts.

"You know the others are going to come get us soon. We have to get up eventually."

"Shh... let me be alone with you for a few minutes." She giggled and buried her face in his shoulder.

That was how their relationship worked. They had been in love for eight goddamn years and that love had never shown any side of fading. Hell, when she'd proposed the idea of going off and stopping the 'Department of Energy', Mike had insisted that he be allowed to help. Which was the decision that had sparked the reforming of the Party—their old friends using their D&D classes as codenames (except Max, who'd never really liked her class in the game). Neither Mike nor El wanted to change anything. Even getting married wouldn't

have changed anything; they were married in all but legal title.

"Hey, lovebirds!" Max called through the door. "Get out here!"

"It was nice while it lasted," Mike grumbled. They got out of bed and headed into the main living area, where everyone else was waiting.

"You have the next mission?" El asked.

"No, but Mike's mom has been calling nonstop for the past hour. Pick up your damn phone, Wheeler."

Mike groaned and picked up his cell, hitting his mother's name in the contacts. El headed for the kitchen to make breakfast... or, rather, dinner.

"Hey, Mom," Mike sighed.

"Michael Theodore Wheeler, were you asleep?! It's four in the afternoon!"

"Yeah, sorry. I've just been exhausted lately."

"Well, I'd appreciate you calling a little bit more. I swear, I hear more from Jane than I do from you." Mike furrowed his brow and covered the receiver.

"El, you've been calling my mom?!"

"It was one time to tell her you were sick!" Mike took a deep breath and put the phone back to his ear.

"Okay, I'm sorry I don't call."

"Well, you can make it up to me tonight. Nancy's home with Jonathan this weekend and I want you and Jane to come over for a family dinner."

"Mom—"

"No ifs, ands, or buts, young man. You are coming to dinner tonight with your girlfriend or so help me..."

"Fine, we'll be there. Bye, Mom."

"Bye, Michael! Love you!"

Click.

"Question: Will, can we go to your house for dinner?" Mike asked his best friend.

"I'm not getting involved with this," Will stated, shaking his head.

"Mike, there's nothing wrong with going to your parents' for dinner," El sighed.

"There is when all it's going to end in is either me arguing with my dad or my mom trying to find out why I haven't proposed to you yet or when she's going to become a grandmother."

"You're not going alone."

"No, because Mom said I had to bring you, too." El set the pan she'd been holding down.

"Well, then, I guess I'd better finish cooking dinner for these guys because God knows they can't."

"Hey, I can cook!" Dustin protested.

"Instant mac and cheese doesn't count."

Mike started laughing, though internally he was still dreading going to his parents.

Last time had been a disaster; he'd gone alone and his father had done nothing but criticize his life choices.

"You can't live with five other people who aren't related to you."

"That Hopper girl is nothing but trouble, son—mark my words."

"Why don't you try and find a different job where you don't have to leave town so much?"

Since El had been out on a mission, he'd returned to the cabin alone and laid in bed until she came home the next day. As soon as he saw

her and they were alone, he'd broken down in her arms and she'd comforted him for hours until he was better.

Now, though, they were heading back into the lions' den.

Quick update, right?

Don't get used to this. I already have a story that's being updated daily and I think this one will be updated fairly quickly, too. But this might go daily once I finish 'Normal is Overrated', so keep an eye out!

So long and thanks for all the fish!

3. Dinner at the Wheelers

13 Maple Street, Hawkins, Indiana. November 7, 20XX. 1800 Hours.

"I changed my mind. Let's go home."

"Mike—"

"My parents and sisters are in there. Not to mention *your* stepbrother. It's going to be an inquisition."

"Michael Wheeler, you convinced me to wear a goddamn dress. We are *not* going home. Now knock and let's do this."

Mike took a deep breath and rapped on the door. He and El had ended up borrowing Carmen for the ride over since Max had decided to 'fix up' his car, and the red motorcycle was parked in the Wheelers driveway. No doubt Ted Wheeler had heard it and added it to the list of things he disapproved of in his only son's life.

The door swung open to reveal Holly, Mike's eleven-year-old sister. She squealed and hugged him immediately before turning her attention to his girlfriend.

"Hiya, Holly," El greeted her.

"Come on in!" Holly pulled El into the house, Mike following behind and shutting the door.

The house hadn't changed much since the last time he'd been there, almost a year ago. There was a new picture of Holly on the fireplace, and the TV had been replaced, but other than that, it was the same. It appeared that his mother had lost her need to constantly remodel the house since he'd moved out—which, come to think of it, had been right before his fight with Ted that ended his visits entirely.

Strange.

"Michael, Jane!" breathed Karen, embracing them. "Let me get a look at you!"

As Mike had predicted, her gaze drifted to El's left hand, searching for an engagement ring. He didn't miss the disappointment in her eyes when she didn't find it. But her face brightened again as she smiled.

"Dinner's almost ready. Why don't you two go wash up?" She caught her son by the shoulder as El disappeared into the bathroom. "Michael, I'd better see a ring on that girl's finger next time."

"Mom!"

"I'm serious. You've been *insisting* she's the one since you were thirteen! What's keeping you from marrying her?"

"She doesn't think we're ready to take that step—financially, I mean. Rings and weddings are pretty expensive."

Karen's face softened, then she gasped.

"You asked her, didn't you?"

"No, Mom, but we've discussed it."

"She'll say yes if you ask."

She... technically did. But there's no ring or anything yet.

"Mike!"

He looked up to see his older sister, Nancy, making her way downstairs. Her boyfriend, Jonathan, was right behind her.

"Is El here?" Nancy asked.

"She is. I'd never come here without her. Not after last time."

"He's not going to be *less* of an ass just because she's here, you know."

"I know, but at least she's here."

El stepped out of the bathroom just in time for Karen to announce that dinner was ready. Mike took a seat at the table, El right beside him, and he could think of back when he'd first started dating her when they were thirteen. Back then, she'd sat by him and they'd held

hands under the table the entire meal. He'd been so excited that he had a girlfriend that he hadn't noticed the disapproving looks his father gave El, or the way that El shrank under his father's gaze. Now he was older and knew better.

The Hopper family is nothing but trouble, son.

She's like her old man—a delinquent who just wants to have fun and doesn't take anything seriously.

She'll break your heart.

God, he wished he could go back and slap his father a few... dozen times for saying that kind of shit about the love of his life. None of it was true. Sure, El stole things, but it was how she'd been raised. She took everything in her life seriously, and Mike knew that she would never *willingly* leave him. Maybe his father's disapproval was part of the reason he'd jumped at the chance to become an international criminal—though, as El had told him more than once, if they got caught, she'd likely get the worst of any punishment.

"How's your dad, Jane?" asked Karen, looking at El expectantly.

"He's fine. He and Joyce are doing great." Mike could tell El's smile was forced and his dad was glaring at her.

"Well, that's good."

"You hear about that group of thieves on the news?" Holly asked, breaking through the awkwardness.

"What group of thieves?" Karen inquired, furrowing her brow.

"They broke into a place in Siberia really early this morning and stole the Grail of Dionysus from somebody who'd stolen it in Greece."

"Oh, the Party!" Nancy realized aloud. "They steal from other thieves and return stuff to where it belongs."

"Like a Robin Hood type," Karen agreed.

"They're lowlifes, every one of them," Ted stated. "They need to be

locked up."

You'd say that even if you knew I was one of them. Especially about El.
Mike *really* wanted to go home.

Siberian Prison, Siberia, Russia. November 7, 20XX. 1750 Hours.

Steve took a deep breath as he approached the cell where the thief was. He was called Nine and didn't have any other name. The girl who'd hired him—who called herself Kat—had asked him to question the suspect to gather more information on Mage and the Party.

"You're Nine," Steve stated bluntly.

"And you're a cop," Nine fired back. "What do you want?"

"Information."

"I'm not saying *anything* about who I work for."

"Not about *you*. Mage."

"Mage. Traitorous bitch. I wish she'd get shot."

"Traitorous?"

"She used to work with me. Then she got all these ideas in her head about being a good person and ran off. This morning was the first time I've seen her in eight years." He grinned. "She looks good, though. Not a little kid anymore."

Okay, he's a creep. Good to know.

"What was her name when she worked with you?"

"Eleven."

"Do you know anything else about her or her group?"

"Nah, not except that they're a bunch of nerds."

That matched up with the evidence; whoever was working with Mage had a certain level of skill with computers and their programs. Not to mention the tire-tracks from a motorcycle they'd found outside the Siberian compound. She had at least *two* accomplices, and one of them had been in Siberia with her when she'd stolen the Grail. Though, if Steve was being honest with himself, he didn't think Mage was a bad person. If anything, she was better than the 'Department of Energy' fucks who thought it was okay to steal priceless artifacts from their home countries. And if she was working with people who shared her values... well, then, let them.

But you can't quit.

Kat would kill him if he tried. Not to mention the rest of his team would be joining him in a couple of days. From what Kat had told him, she was calling the shots and his best bet was to shut up and obey. He was *glad* to let her take the reins if it meant that he didn't have to bring in people he saw as actually decent.

"Thank you. Have fun in your cell."

Steve walked away and outside. Kat pulled up in the same midnight-blue car she'd dropped him off in an hour earlier and he slipped into the passenger seat.

"What did he say?"

"He said he used to work with Mage, eight years ago."

"She's only been on our radar for a year and a half. My guess is that she went off the radar for a few years—maybe for school, maybe to lay low."

"He also said her team is made up of a bunch of nerds."

"Nothing wrong with nerds. We have all our tech because of nerds."

"I'm *friends* with nerds."

Kat pulled out of the parking lot and headed towards Moscow. Steve felt weird being so far from Indiana. It was where he'd grown up, where he'd been 'King Steve' during high school. Compared to him,

Kat was exotic despite her 'all-American girl' disposition. During the plane ride, she'd told him about some of her missions around the world—India, Australia, Brazil, France... she'd seen more than he had even though they were the same age.

"How long have you worked for the Organization?"

"Four years, give or take. You lose track when you're on the road so much. You'll see what I mean when they start sending you out more."

"So, about our team..."

"You'll meet Kali when we get to London. From there, it's back to New York to meet the others."

Her sleeve slipped down and he noted a number on her arm.

001.

"What does the number mean?"

"What number?"

"The 001 on your arm."

"It's a stupid tattoo my friend dared me to get when I turned eighteen. She said it was because I was like a prototype of a robot."

"Well, okay, then."

13 Maple Street, Hawkins, Indiana. November 7, 20XX. 2000 hours.

"I told you you'd survive."

Mike made a face at El as she smiled at him. They were in his old room at his parents' house because his mother had insisted he and El stay the night instead of going back to the cabin. And once Karen Wheeler said something, it was pretty much law and he couldn't say no. Probably one of the better things his mother had insisted on, actually.

"Did you see how my dad was glaring at you? He thinks you're a bad influence and you're going to drag me down."

"Mike, because of me, you're an internationally-wanted criminal."

"So?" She rolled her eyes and went over to the closet. "What are you doing?"

"Grabbing one of your old T-shirts to wear for pajamas. Good thing you left a bunch of them here."

Mike dove to close his door and locked it as El reached for the zipper of her dress. Like the good (and slightly horny) boyfriend he was, he unzipped it for her since it was hard to reach. She pulled the dress off and undid her bra before sliding on his old *Star Wars* shirt and climbing onto his bed.

"Let's get some sleep. Dustin called and said we're heading to Australia tomorrow. Maybe you'll get some sun and some more freckles."

"I burn like nobody's business."

"Then bring sunblock."

He laid down next to her and smiled before tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, too."

"As soon as it's all over, I'll give you a real proposal. And the nicest ring I can buy."

"Mike, I don't need a ring."

"My mom would kill me if I didn't give you one." She kissed him gently. "I just hope you'll still say yes."

"I'm going to say yes."

"You can do so much better than—"

"No, I can't. I love you and that's what matters. I'm not going anywhere."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

He pulled her close and she snuggled into his chest.

Okay, I promise *cringes* that this story actually has a plot. Mike and El's romance is the subplot, though, because they're basically married already and it doesn't matter. Well, it kind of does. I don't know.

So long and thanks for all the fish!

4. Chicago

Pacific Ocean. November 10, 20XX. 0116 Hours.

If someone had asked El when she was a child where she thought she'd be on her twenty-first birthday, she would've said on a heist with Eight, One, and Twelve. But no, that was no longer her answer. It hadn't been her answer in eight years. Now her answer was on a plane, cuddling with her boyfriend/basicly-her-husband while they flew back to America to deal with a crisis in Chicago. Mike was snoring gently, which was what was preventing her from sleeping, but she was glad to be lying there with her head on his chest and the gentle hum of the plane's engine as they flew over the ocean.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket and she pulled it out, the brightness turned down so it wouldn't burn Mike's eyes if he woke up.

Package was received by Australian PM. Reward is in our account.

A smile spread across her face.

Chicago museum on lockdown. Ready to go.

"Heading straight to Chicago!" called Lucas from the cockpit. "Just got the message from Dustin."

"Good."

Mike stirred against her.

"What's going on?" he mumbled sleepily.

"We're heading straight to Chicago. Go back to sleep."

"No..." He pulled her tighter against him and she had to stifle a giggle. Mike got clingy when he was tired—not full-on exhausted, just tired. "Wanna cuddle..."

"And we will. But go to sleep. You need it."

"Okay, Love."

Despite the comfort of Mike's presence, she couldn't sleep. Partially due to his snoring, but also because of the thoughts that always plagued her when her birthday rolled around. Thoughts of her mother, who the Department had said abandoned her at birth, if she had any other family, if that family wanted her. But she'd come to terms with all of that. She had Hopper and Joyce and Jonathan and Will and the Party. That was the family that wanted her, the family that had taken her gladly when she escaped. Even though she was a criminal and her father was a police officer, he didn't arrest her. He welcomed her home with open arms.

And then her thoughts drifted to Chicago, to the last time she'd seen Eight and One. It had been shortly before her escape from the program, nine years earlier. She and her two sisters had been on a heist in Chicago—or more specifically, Eight and One had been heisting and El had been lookout. Something had gone wrong that night, and she'd been pulled out by Brenner. Her sisters hadn't been so lucky and they'd vanished into thin air. Dead, Doctor Owens had said, or as good as. El had made a fateful decision that night, returning alone, and that decision was the best one she'd ever made...

Chicago, Illinois. November 6, 200X. 0100 Hours.

"Keep your eye on the street while we're inside."

Eleven nodded to her sisters, who were dressed in black. One seemed on edge, to say the least. Eight didn't fare any better. But the three of them—top of their class, raised by the Department—were on their first assignment together. Brenner was nearby supervising, but he was not to interfere unless necessary.

"I'll bypass security and you grab the statue," One instructed Eight. "As soon as you do, head to the rendezvous point and I'll meet you there. Eleven, make sure to signal if you see anything. Once I give you the okay, you come meet us."

"Okay!"

"Good. I'll see you later."

One used one of the keys she'd picked off a guard earlier that day to open the door to the museum. She and Eight made their way inside, where she set up shop at the security console and connected to the system to disable the sensor grid around the statue. Eight made it to the statue and grabbed it, heading straight for where they'd agreed to meet.

Then an alarm went off.

Eleven stiffened in panic.

"One! Eight!" she called desperately into her earpiece. "Get out, now!"

"Can't—system unsecure—breaking up!" came One's voice, broken up by some kind of interference.

Sirens began to wail in the distance and Brenner ran up, grabbing Eleven's hand and carrying her away from the scene.

"Wait!" she begged. "What about One and Eight?!"

"They must pay the price for their transgressions alone. You did nothing wrong, but they did. Otherwise, there would have been no alarm set off."

Eleven's heart dropped. Her sisters were in there. The building was locking down in accordance with protocol not to let the thieves out. They'd be caught and put into prison, perhaps questioned about their involvement with the Department, and everything would be ruined. More than likely, both of them would be killed so the secrets of the Department wouldn't be let out. She'd never see them again.

Then a thought occurred to her, as she rode in the helicopter back to the base. What would happen if *she* screwed up? Would she be left behind too, left for dead? Yes, yes she would. It was protocol for if a member of the Department got caught—they would be killed by the Department's assassins before they could spill any of its secrets. She'd known that. But she hadn't thought that it would apply to the 'young agents' under Brenner. It did. It completely did. Her sisters were going to die and she'd be alone with the other nine members of their class—people who creeped her out (Nine, Two, and Four) or ignored

her because she was 'Papa's favorite' (Three, Five, and Six) or were too involved with other things to bother with her (Ten). The only person she had now was Twelve, who was young. Very young.

She needed to get out.

She wanted to live.

But where could she go?

Hotel Mauve, Room 1113. Chicago, Illinois. November 10, 20XX. 1500 Hours.

The room Dustin had gotten them this time around was much nicer than what they usually got.

"There a reason you didn't get us a basic room, Dusty?" El asked jokingly into the phone.

"Hey. You guys deserve something nice every once in a while. Cut me a break."

"Well, thank you. I appreciate it."

"So, I heard about the proposal." El sighed. "Why did you say no?"

"I wanted to say yes." She sat down in a chair. "But this isn't the time for that step. I'm... I'm worried about Mike becoming a target for the Department. If he's my husband, that just puts a big red 'X' on his back."

"Ellie—"

"I love him, Dustin. I'm going to marry him one day. But that day isn't coming for a while."

"I get it. I do. Just... he's been devoted to you for almost a decade now."

"Dustin. I want to marry him. I want him to be safe. Both of those things aren't possible right now. Hell, I have enough trouble trying to convince him to stay behind with Lucas when we're out in the field

while we're just dating. How's it going to be if we're engaged or *married?*"

"Okay, okay... I'll leave it alone. But only because I know you're gonna let him know your real answer one of these days."

There was a *click* at the door, letting her know Mike was coming inside.

"Thanks, Dustin. I'll talk to you when it's time to go." She hung up and Mike entered the room.

"What was that about?" he inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"I was just thanking him for getting us a fancy hotel room." She hugged her boyfriend and he hugged her back, his hands trailing down to her rear as he tilted her head up to kiss her.

"Would it be presumptuous of me to take you to bed, Miss Hopper?"

"Only if you wanted to *sleep*."

The words felt like an old routine, one they tended to engage in whenever they had a hotel room like this. Lucas and Max were staking out the museum (one that El still had yet to be told the name of), so she and Mike were completely alone for the next few hours. And they'd be alone the next day, when they'd go full tourist on Chicago to avoid arousing suspicion from law enforcement and the Department before the heist. And once said heist was over, they'd go back to Hawkins to make the next set of plans.

Too bad the universe had other ideas...

Okay, so I know this chapter was short, but next chapter we'll actually get to the heist. Which I foreshadowed... not going well. No, heist does not go well. That's kind of the plot of this and it's important.

(Side-note: there's an upcoming plot point that you all might hate me for)

So long and thanks for all the fish!